

Summary

Second Main Session ***"International Educational Networks and Development in the Pacific Basin"***

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- Speaker:** Prof. Toshio Kobayashi, (NIME, Japan)
Prof. Hayato Yamanaka, (NIME, Japan)
- Discussions:** Prof. Richard Wah, (The University of the South Pacific, Fiji)
co-author: Dr. Matthewson, (The University of the South Pacific, Fiji)
Prof. Ellen Tion, (Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, The
Solomon Islands)
co-author: Prof. Ian Hind, (Solomon Islands College of Higher Education, The Solomon Islands)
- Commentator:** Prof. Michael Ogden, (University of Hawaii, Manoa)
- Moderator:** Dr. Tatsuhiko Kawashima, (Gakushuin University, Japan)

Under the theme of "Higher Education and Class Formation in Southeast Asia," the first session emphasized the importance of efforts to provide people with equal opportunities for higher education. Along the same lines, the discussion also focussed on distance higher education. This type of education aims to offer higher education to people living in remote and isolated areas. With this aim in mind, an attempt was made in the first session to connect King Mongkut's Institute of Technology (KMIT) in Thailand with this conference hall by way of the telecommunications satellite ETS-V and to hold an open conference between these places. This experiment demonstrated one potential role of satellite-based networks, which will make such two-way communications possible.

Following the lines of the first session, the second session focussed on the distance education system of the University of the South Pacific (USP), which uses its own internally developed communications network, USPNET. The main points raised in the discussion concerned the current status of USPNET, its importance, its problems, and its possible role in the future.

At this point, presentation of relevant geographic and demographic information might promote a better understanding of the distance education issue. The South Pacific Commission (SPC) has defined the South Pacific region as the area from 130 degrees east longitude to 130 degrees west longitude and from 30 degrees south latitude to 20 degrees north latitude. This beautiful oceanic area encompasses more than twenty island groups, small and large, and has a total population of 6 million. Two-thirds of its population, or 4 million people, live in Papua New Guinea. Fiji is the second-most populated country, with 0.7 million people. It is followed by the Solomon Islands, with more than 0.3 million; Western Samoa, with less than 0.2 million; and the Republic of Vanuatu, with 0.15 million. Pitcairn Island, an official member of the SPC, is the least populated territory, with only about 50 persons. Thus, the South Pacific region is characterized by numerous island countries and territories, with very different population levels, dispersed across a vast oceanic area.

Against this backdrop, USP is an institution of higher education with an academic research center, established in Suva, the capital of Fiji, in 1970 as a representative entity for regional consolidation. USP's education-by-correspondence department conducts distance education by utilizing USPNET in connection with USP regional centers which are located in each of the USP member countries or territories except the Tokelau Islands. "Member country or territory" means a country or territory in which a university becomes a member of UPSNET and gains support from the country or territory. These member countries or territories are as follows: the Cook Islands, Fiji, the Republic of Kiribati, the Republic of Nauru, Niue Island, the Solomon Islands, the Tokelau Islands, the Kingdom of Tonga, Tuvalu, the Republic of Vanuatu, and Western Samoa.

During the second session, the following four papers were presented on USPNET, which serves as an international and regional educational network.

- I. A position paper by Dr. Yamanaka and Prof. Kobayashi analyzes the results of an overall-assessment survey of USP's distance education and USPNET, and concludes as follows:
 - (i) Those who have gained a degree through distance education are less highly regarded than those who have done so through on-campus education.
 - (ii) USPNET is generally recognized to be necessary and is confidently expected to be beneficial. In actuality, however, USPNET is not yet fully utilized, in that what we call outer islands are not targeted for USPNET services.
- II. Prof. Wah's paper summarizes USPNET's specific features as follows:
 - (i) Educational tools for USP's distance education are mainly printed media, audio devices, and cassette tapes. USPNET serves as a supplementary method to those educational tools.
 - (ii) Making good use of USPNET offers three major advantages to a distance education system: 1) it enhances the communications of teachers and other staff members between regional centers and USP; 2) it facilitates frequent

communications between teachers and students; and 3) it improves educational quality through better communications between USP and other universities and other regions.

- (iii) The equipment currently used for USPNET is the ATS-1. However, because it was installed 20 years ago, it is partly non-functional and sometimes non-operational and has become antiquated. Concern is growing about the increasing maintenance and operation costs involved in continuing the use of such old equipment.

III. The paper by Prof. Hind and Prof. Tion reports on distance education and higher education in the Solomon Islands, as follows:

- (i) Only 30 percent of the students who finish primary school in this country go on to a middle-level school. Only a few percent of these students continue to obtain further education at a high school.
- (ii) The Solomon Islands' distance education policies emphasize the following three aims: 1) to improve the technological skills--to promote what we call reeducation--of trained or skilled people who live in remote areas; 2) to spread not only higher education but also primary- and middle-level education; and 3) to promote continuing education, particularly in villages.

IV. Prof. Ogden's paper states that the development of distance education in the South Pacific region will possibly affect societies in that region as follows:

- (i) Distance education will be accepted as a supplementary or substitute system, particularly for students who are not on scholarship, because a scholarship is necessary to obtain an on-campus education.
- (ii) The development of distance education will contribute to the building of multiple social identities or juxtaposed identities in that region. These social identities will be formed at the individual-island level within each country or territory; at the country or territorial level; at the regional or South Pacific level; and at the global level.

After the presentations of these four papers, there was a discussion regarding the advantages and disadvantages that technological development will bring to a distance higher-education system. Representative opinions were as follows: The use of satellite-based telecommunications as a tool of distance education might have a negative impact on the indigenous culture of an island country or a territory. But opposing opinions were expressed, and it was suggested that higher education should be extended to outer islands through the expansion of USPNET. Thus, the discussion was very heated and impressive.